

STAGING CALAMITY?

Mise en scène and performance at Avignon 2005

Even before the fifty-ninth Avignon Festival had even begun, if one heeded the press or the festival regulars, one thing appeared to be clear: there would be no more theatre, either classical or contemporary, mise en scène would make way for performance art and all the shows would struck with the same despair, blighted with all of the world's calamities.

Such a catastrophic forecast nonetheless deserved to be verified: had theatrical mise en scène really disappeared and had calamity become the new universal theme?

It's true that, on paper, and perhaps in the minds of the festival directors, Hortense Archambault and Vincent Baudrier, and of the guest artistic director, Jan Fabre, it was a golden opportunity to bring together "artists of the stage" who, "by way of their creations, question our human identity spiritually and as animals", "examining our relationship with our bodies and with our fantasies, our relations with beauty, but also with violence, which sometimes coexist in us" (*Festival Program*, p.1).

Violence certainly inhabits us, but does it not also inhabit the work of artists? We would like to check this in analysing eight shows seen in the first week of the festival. The very expression of violence, calamity, is a theme among others, but it is a sufficiently general leitmotif to allow the making of comparisons. If catastrophe is a punctual and irreversible phenomenon, calamity is a more lasting, or even permanent, state: a scourge affecting crops, an ecological disaster hitting a region, a misfortune or collapse affecting a people. Whether the catastrophe be a natural disaster or a man-made one, either way calamity brings about a long-lasting state of apathy for many artists. Their works, nonetheless, often show a will to overcome a blocked situation brought about by calamity by seeking a fiction and aesthetic way out of the crisis. As always, their responses are individual and it is thus more valuable to analyse their achievements than their discourses, their commentaries or what we assume to be the intentions that accompany and sometimes even precede them.

1)"May our bodies weep/ to prevent a catastrophe" (p.37), is the claim of Knight of despair in *L'histoire des larmes*¹, Jan Fabre's production, which opened the festival, a few days before the reprise of *Je suis sang*. This leitmotif of the production is also one of the keys to most of the *in* festival shows. The free expression of a –

¹ Jan Fabre, *L'Histoire des larmes*, Paris, l'Arche, 2005.

sympathetic rather than heroic - body pushed to its extremes, is the requirement for most of the shows to save humanity from the calamity in which it finds itself. The body without language, dance more than dramatic art, raw performance art rather than *mise en scène*, appear, on first sight, capable of meeting this requirement. But to represent and show calamity, the answer vary from artist to artist. There are basically two solutions: ***mise en scène*** and **performance art**. *Mise en scène* requires dramatic fiction, representation; performance fulfils, presents a live, unrepeatable, real, and not fictive action. The chosen examples vacillate between these two theoretical poles, making any distinction problematic.

L'histoire des larmes is above all a piece of choreography, a production organised as movement in space. In the *cour d'honneur* of the Palais des Papes, it brings together percussionists, dancers, and actors. The latter, of which there are three: the Knight of despair, the Dog (Diogenes the Cynical) and the Rock have the power of speech. The Knight operates in the centre of the stage, the philosopher runs from one side to the other, the rock, '*obscenam in mulierem*', speaks from a window in the façade, almost offstage, obscene, meaning that, according to a somewhat doubtful etymology, before the Latin '*scaena*', so on the edge of the playing space. They take the floor regularly in fairly long monologues, but the show does not base itself on this spoken dramaturgy. There is a spatio-temporal composition, it includes the vast space of the *cour d'honneur* and the facades, the trajectory of the groups and objects, the temporal unfolding of the musical score (renaissance harp, percussion, sung baroque voice). With this admirable sense of architectural and pictorial composition, Fabre gives us one scene after another each in a different style, from an individual routine to a ballet for six or eight dancers, to simultaneous and coordinated actions. As in a Bosch painting (think of his last judgement²), the elements are juxtaposed onstage with a certain autonomy, but the viewer is in a position to perceive a figure of the whole, all the more easily since the huge percussion instruments, the harp centre stage and the very beautiful musical composition by Eric Sleichim create an auditory continuum, which makes the spatio-temporal composition, the symmetry and the disorder of the motifs, more noticeable. We fleetingly notice such and such a reference to Bosch's grotesque figures, climbing immense cliff faces, to the monstrous forms, such as eiderdowns with feet crisscrossing the stage. At times an image crosses the show: glass blown by long sticks, glass vessels on which the dancers lie down are concrete and abstract, that is to say, allegorical, manifestations of human tears. The auditory, pictorial, and choreographic composition, the appearance and development of visual motifs have

² Alte Pinacothek Munich.

their own logic, they are not subject to the text. To such an extent that the verbal utterances seem more like foreign bodies in overall composition, especially those of the Knight, spoken with a slight accent and a certain distance, as if split from the image and the visual and auditory event. There is no fixed, frozen or global image, as in the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but moments of continuous explosion, flashes of light, fleeting reference to medieval painting. Never does the closed system of mise en scène, coherent in relation to a text-based dramaturgical conception or a philosophy, come into play. This production has nothing of the “histoire des larmes” as seen by Roland Barthes: “in what societies, in what periods did one cry? Since when do men (and not women) no long cry? [...] Perhaps ‘to cry’ is too wide; maybe we should not refer all tears to one same meaning.”³ As for Jan Fabre, he does not consider tears in a cultural history of emotion. He sees them simply as a watery secretion, alongside sweat, urine and to a lesser extent sperm, these “golden tears [which] compose love songs and symphonies of joy” (p.35-36), as the Knight so poetically puts it.

But where does this Knight come from? From the wandering knights of our time, artists? And what philosophy is he advocating? In any case he has some very fixed ideas about bodily fluids, particularly tears: “The crying body/ can bring about/ a magical transformation of the world” (p. 32). This magical thinking is impregnated with idealism: “though is the heritage of the soul” (p. 39). Often declamatory, explicit and talkative, the Knight is concerned about the drying out of human beings, but his message remains obscure. Do the tears take us back the tragic nature of existence or to the biological necessity of hydrating the body and mind? Faced with such a dubious philosophy, given the beauty and power of the images, one is tempted to disregard the words in favour of bathing in the sensuality of the visual and auditory images. Far from being text-based theatre, this heterogeneous production is made up of choreographic and musical fragments arising from improvisation and reworked by Fabre. Within this production, moments of performance art occur, whenever an action is repeated or prolonged in an improvisation. Ironic counterpoints are always a possibility, for example the stage rain towards the end in the style of *Singing in the rain*, right after the lament about things drying out.

2) In *Je suis sang*, Jan Fabre returns to the same principles of composition, in particular between the stage actions and the very didactic final text. This show, which opened in 2003, is about blood, a subject of vital importance for medieval thought and desperately lacking in our times. The final litany “je suis sang”, “sanguis sum” is taken up by the chorus of dancers, while a red liquid, more like wine

³ Fragments d'un discours amoureux (1977), *(Œuvres complètes, Paris, Seuil, 1995, vol.3,p.627.*

than blood is sprinkled to go back to a Dionysian ritual and to a vitality that the renaissance and the process of civilisation has supposedly repressed. This calling for a society that does not oppress instinct is strangely reminiscent of the birth of tragedy according to Nietzsche. *Je suis sang* finds a balance between the harmony of the forms and the turbulent violent of blood. There too, the Dionysian and Apollonian forces, “the two impulses of art are obliged to unfold their forces in rigorously reciprocal proportions according to the law of eternal justice”.⁴ What threatens humanity with annihilation would therefore be the death of instinct, the taming of the body, its anaemia linked to the civilising process of modern times. But (is it a cause or a consequence?) it is also as much about violence, castration, and bloodshed. Calamity is pre-programmed (“the blue planet will become red”), parodied (“the tango of the butchers of the Villette slaughterhouse”), aestheticised, and all of this despite of the representation of violence: stumps oozing blood, chopped-off genitals, women dancing with their hands tied behind their backs, tortured bodies emptied of their blood. Once again, the text shocks by way of its straight-forwardness and its naiveté: “I like my impotence”, “enjoyment [jouissance] beyond enjoyment [jouissance]”, “I am a wounded, disinterested, man”. Fortunately, the stage event always takes the upper hand over the emergent text. The constant production of new images, visual shocks, the overflowing imagination of the images, the virtuosity and energy of the dancers give new impetus to the production. There is nothing perverse or decadent in this picture of destruction and reconstruction, only an overflowing vital energy, which refuses to be channelled, into veins, into words nor into stage space and which flows abundantly, while the blood inscribes itself onto the black of the stage and the white of the wedding gowns. Calamity, be it the absence of water or of blood, is never the final state of things, because everybody fights against it, and the emergent speech, as direct as it may be, is also an impetus for reaction and the surpassing of oneself.

3) *Dieu et les esprits vivants*, written and directed by Jan Decorte, is a disconcerting experience in many ways. The story is hardly comprehensible, and the silent presence of Decorte as a monk soldier, no more enlightening. Even if, as is stated in the programme, “this is writing, not biography”, and if, “the way of writing has nothing to do with automatic writing, it’s more of a writing directed in all directions”, the reader instinctively searches for a meaning, for a direction to give the narrative. As Decorte explains in the programme: “*Dieu et les esprits vivants* encompasses a great deal

⁴ *La naissance de la tragédie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1977, p.142.

of subjects: good and evil, language, the world and so much more, but it is probably above all a text about murder. It's a kind of anatomy, philology, or encyclopaedia of murder. Something sends this man named blood, wolf, devil into a mad rage. Mad with rage to the point of killing. While calamity is anonymous, murder, on the other hand, is 'personal'; provided we understand the motives; now, in this case, we don't even know if it has even been committed. This situation would not be hopeless if the stage action caught the attention in such a way as to make the spectator dream. But the spectator merely witnesses, for the first twenty minutes, the actor washing his whole body, from head to toe, willy included! Throughout this unending introit, the spectator waits for the real start, the beginning* of the fiction. But this washing has no other function but to test the patience of the audience, provoking anger or boredom. The only option remaining for the spectator is to see this long episode as a provocation, a moment of performance art intended to make him reflect on his expectations, limits, and his impatience. The only thing that prevents us from definitively rejecting the show is the haunting and magnificent music Arno providing an uncanny basso continuo. Likewise, the audience appreciates the dance solo by the great choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, who appears without dramaturgical justification as an impromptu with virtuosity and in a 1980s style. The washing, the music and the dance are autonomous moments of performance art within a production that has trouble 'taking off', creating the illusion of a possible world. In the same way, the tour de force of Sigrid Vinks, who speaks the text, finally earns our attention: the strangeness of her words, her slightly foreign accent, the relationship of entranced confidence she shares with the audience, her way of leaning toward the audience, to show the palms of her hands to the audience, all of this creates an intimacy and a tension which owe nothing to the fiction of the text. It is an effect of performance, unexpected in a what is supposed to be the story of a murder like in a traditional staging.

This performance would surely seem lean compared with what has been left to one side: the untapped beauty of the space, the inanity of text, the provocation that wears itself and us out, the monotony of the hopping of the monk (photo ..). It's a total disaster and one finds oneself wanting the calamities of Bosch, the crudity of Breugel, the obsessions of Fabre.

4) The question of calamity, as opposed to that tragical catastrophe has always been at the heart of the work of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio de Claudia et Romeo Castellucci et de Chiara Giudi. Since 2002, they have produced eleven episodes of the Tragedia

Endogonidia, a tragedy destined to grow by scissiparity and has already birthed a dozen offspring in various European towns.

B. 03 Berlin, showing at the Avignon municipal theatre, is, according to the programme, “a Episode that tells the parable of the life and death of a woman, who knows motherhood, crime, the confusion between the power of life and the power of death. Her anonymity which is clouded with that of the audience, speech deprivation, weakness before the law, the helpless pain constitute the essential conditions for this tragedy, which also involves the ‘role’ of the spectator by way of a metaphor of a stalls inhabited by rabbits”. Who can understand such a muddled text?⁵ The important part is in the production! To read these commentaries or Castellucci’s theoretical musings will only bother the well-meaning spectator. This is all the more the case since here the Castellucci’s define tragedy in terms that might better suit calamity: anonymity, the absence of speech, the confusion between life and death. It is obvious in any case that it is no longer a question of the Greek Attic tragedy, but of an ‘inhuman’ tragedy yet to come, which is precisely the object of their theatrical research. “I feel”, says Romeo, “that this will be a cold, transparent, clean and unnamed tragedy. I feel that nobody will realise they are faced with a tragedy and that will be the best proof of its efficiency.”⁵

It remains, then, to examine what is most important: the production as research into this tragedy by way of the events that that are shown in the staging.

If we only use the images shown onstage in *B.03 Berlin*, we observe a series of tableaux in constant development, figures made foggy by the gauze (or plastic) curtain that separates stage from auditorium. There is always, in the literal as well as figurative sense, a screen between the action and us. We never have access to the clear perception of the objects and the bodies; they are represented by figures such as silhouettes, shadows, forms, phantoms or phantasies. Only ‘King Kong’, whether famous gorilla or the brown Berliner bear, come to the foreground, in his usual outfit, to move corpses of rabbits around with a fork, well-known images from the concentration camps. Behind the curtain, which is more or less translucent depending on the lighting, we imagine there to be torturing or the intertwined bodies of loves, and it is not easy to make the distinction. Crime, vengeance, the massacre of the innocents, are clearly out there, but we are refused access, reality escapes us as it were all a mirage. Calamity is the impossibility of reaching the real, to see only its shadows, to not, or to not yet, perceive the tragic (as Castellucci rightly puts it), to no longer possess the instruments necessary for judging and accepting fate. We hope

⁵ Working materials, read at Avignon , 13 July 2005.

for the tragic, in order to at least know who we're dealing with, but we only encounter calamity, this head of Medusa with serpents for hair.

To stage is to propose a series of constantly evolving figures. These anthropomorphic figures are in constant transformation, without a final destination. To describe and interpret them, one could draw on the iconology of⁶. Iconology identifies the work as a formal object, but also as a conventional meaning (knowledge of representational codes) and finally as symbol and symptom of the mental attitudes of a time, or even a worldview. Let's take as an example this object resembling a pillar, a tomb or perhaps the stone table of laws of Moses*. We identify it as a form that could be toppled; next we think of the familiar form of the tables of law that a furious Moses would smash before the Jews; when the little girl appears, in a moment of calm, to put some order back into the place of calamity, she puts the table back without thinking: law is restored and this image becomes the distillation of the Judeo-Christian conception.

This iconological allows us to understand the way in which the figures, objects and human beings, keep transforming themselves and escape both from the creators and the spectators, without ever reaching a final point. At every stage, we must work out exactly where in the narrative we are and what human figures are emerging. The enigma is never solved, it becomes what drives the *mise en scène*, a "a figure that arrives in a flash, no sooner has it appeared, it disappears. It brings together that is both obvious and enormously complex". (Claudia Castellucci, p. 3).

The theatre of image needs the iron fist of the 'director', who must stick the through line of the action and cannot allow the slightest dip in energy, in order to avoid that the spectator wake from his daydream. Castellucci and Guidi manage to do this well, provided that the spectator tolerates the slow changes, the lengthy blur of the figures, and the uncertainty of the narrative. They know at exactly what moments the image must coagulate into a possible meaning before going on its way. They know how to play on the progression of the stage images: for example, after the long shaping of a blurry, uncertain and dream-like, grey image, they suddenly bring down from the flies a brightly coloured rainbow (red, green, yellow, blue, brown), which makes a contrast and alters the rhythm of the narrative. At other moments, they contrast the blurred image with realistic sounds from the sound track. The sudden use of external elements is not necessarily without opportunism: the quotations in German ("show yourself", "cross the bridge", "come here", "closer", "eat my ashes", "eat my metal", "drink my water") are entirely without justification

⁶ Studies in iconology, 1939

within the auditory landscape except as a reminder that the play, funded by the city of Berlin, makes a reference to Germany (to its flag, the white Berliner bear, and once again to inexhaustible allusion to death camps). The *mise en scène* is not always entirely faithful to its idea of keeping the enigma alive; it ends up telling a story and moreover ending on a note of innocence and hope. Within a chorus of celestial voices, a young girl appears, a sort of Alice in Wonderland who lifts up the table of laws, looks through the translucent curtain, looks for a way out, in short brings a last minute note of childlike, while the curtain drops to the sound of soothing music.

Unlike in previous productions such as the *Oresteia* and the *Genesi*, the stage does not contain any disruptive element: no animals, no freaks, no wailing baby, no unpredictable element come from the world of performance art, threatens the visual and aesthetic harmony. Without the iconology, tightly controlled by the *mise en scène*, being put in danger, the production, which is cold and calculated and beautiful in a glacial way, becomes irreproachable: would one criticise a dream for being too vague, banal or subjective? Would one reproach a director's vision for being too personal, indecipherable, or untranslatable? This theatre of images is the culmination of the theatre of art and western *mise en scène*. Its score is as beautiful, but also as fragile, as a spider's web.

It remains to be seen whether this production corresponds to this "cold, transparent, clean and unnamed tragedy", to which we have given the name 'calamity', in contrast with Greek classical tragedy. Calamity is precisely the unnamed, the as yet unimaginable, the as yet unnamed, and perhaps the unnameable. The work of the Castelluccis consists of getting closer to this by way of figures. The figure struggles with the material to attain a certain figurative and mimetic representation. When this happens, it either runs into King Kong, the herald of calamity, or the little girl, the return of innocence, and we are either frightened or surprised, like the rabbit in the stalls.

5) With *Anathème*, the Jacques Delcuvellerie Groupov offers a quite another way of addressing the question of calamity. It's the anathema that the God of the Old Testament casts on the peoples that do not do his will: bringing, massacres, mass executions, floods, and plagues.

The anathema, in biblical Greek, the curse and cursed object. It is at once total condemnation (excommunication for the Christians) and the person or people cursed by God.

This show lasting 2 hours 45 minutes, is made up of the reading out loud by a group of six people of extracts of Old Testament texts telling of the massacres, genocides, and collective execution following the divine anathema or on His direct orders. For an hour and a half, the audience face a classical painting

depicting an idyllic landscape. Stage left, we hear the readers who are placed on a raised platform number the destructions, while stage right three singers pick up on some words as part of the musical composition by Garrett List and Jean-Pierre Urbano. The spectator, or rather the listener, only sees the painting, the light of the music stands; and so must concentrate on hearing the Bible in all its stylistic splendour and shameless cruelty. The diction is not very consistent: it is very carefully and discreetly delivered by the women, dramatic and bombastic for the men. The audience has trouble staying concentrated during this unending oratorio; many leave the theatre, out of energy or at the end of their tethers. The reading nonetheless continues for almost an additional hour whilst fifteen or so people appear one by one. They come to the back of the stage via a bridge between the wings and the stage. Half surprised and half defiant, each one eyes the audience, then undresses in a very particular way and, as part of the same ritual, calmly remove jewels, personal items and clothing, before, after a few seconds, entering a square of light where all the arrivals remain seated or standing until the end of the ceremony. We have the impression that these are real people who have come from the street or from the audience, and not professional actors. They in fact do play any role, play any character, they take their places and wait while studying audience. However, this act of undressing is not a gratuitous act, it obtains its meaning when linked with the litany of anathemas. We read it as the illustration of the massacre of the innocents, like the final gathering before the *shoah* or the gas chambers. In this sense, the stage action of undressing, be it real or fictional, not only has a direct and gripping impact on the audience, but also gives a very strong message about the violence of religion, the killing frenzy of the supreme being, the close link between monotheism and genocide. The message, if we can use that term, the point of this protest is to juxtapose a terrifying, (mostly) harmoniously spoken or sung narrative and a mute action, worthy of a performance, a happening or a sit-in. This juxtaposition, however, cannot last forever. The reading of the Bible, as we grow accustomed to, and get tired of it, ends up being little more than background noise, or the mechanical listing of acts of violence, and has trouble competing with the presence of naked bodies onstage. These bodies are not aesthetically pleasing nudes, they are the bodies of people of all ages, of all body types, with various different looks. This public display cannot be easy, even if unease is the desired effect. It also has the effect of performance art, as the 'performers' in the eyes of the majority of the audience*, are not in the elsewhere and before of a fiction, but in the here and now of a real action. Within the theatrical structure (the institutional, the stage, the narrative), there are always a few 'bits of reality', authentic events. (Photo). Here, nakedness, hearing the

Bible, the symbolic violence, the allusions to extreme situations by Bruno Bettelheim's definition, are traces of real performances addressed to the spectators as individual people.

Unfortunately, the use of a performance art real, which is certainly remarkably radical, is not backed up by the tools and resources of *mise en scène*: the space, *cloître des carmes*, is poorly used; there is an absence of dramaturgy; the repeated action are tiresome; the only new action, the construction of a wall, is artificial and superfluous; Heiner Müller's line "I told you before not to come back, when you're dead, you're dead" is borrowed from *Bildbeschreibung* (*Description of a landscape*) where it referred to a dead women brought back from hell, but who was asked in the end not to come back to life. Out of context, the line now refers to God, who is also asked not to come back, this corresponds to idea of the return of the religious following the predicted death of God. However, the construction of the small wall seems somewhat childish, particularly because of the animal masks. Thus as soon as radical performance art makes the slightest concession to theatre, the results are catastrophic. (Photo).

Of the eight examples, this piece treats calamity in the most radical way. The question is whether performance art can make do without a single illustration via *mise en scène* and to such a great extent ignore the capabilities and needs of an audience.

6) With *Puur*, a choreographed by Wim Vandekeybus from Boulbon quarry, the theme of calamity finds its purest form of expression, but never in a direct manner. There is a gap between the themes, which definitely refer to violent actions, and the gestuality, that does not have to show violence mimetically. The general story of the live dance and of the film could tell the story of a cursed and castigated group, having taken refuge in a community in the mountains or in a fortified city, their escape and their struggle to survive.

Instead of allowing oneself to be distracted by the themes, particularly the very explicit film images of violence, it is better to analyse the physical actions of the dancers, their sequences of gestures and the interaction of the group. This series of danced actions does not produce a clearly decipherable story, a coded message or a coherent narrative. Vandekeybus sees dance as "emotions of the flesh onstage", one needs a "state for dance since the state is more important than the content." If there are such things as calamity and violence, we can seek them in these emotion and in these states. This is not unlike Raymond Williams's notion of the "structure of feeling", the "continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, until its recognition as a general form, and the relationship of this general form to a give era." Calamity, in this sense, is a both formal and ideological structure. It

is not merely the direct expression of violence and of a story, but the metaphor for a general state of the world.

In *Puur* this state, this “structure of feeling”, is in perpetual evolution, stretching from birth to death. The film has the task of locating the story, of alluding to the events, all of which will then be enacted, performed in the playing area. It shows the delivery and the birth of a child, the persecution of which he is the victim. For the mother as for the artist, this painful paradox is valid: “Now that I have you I can only lose you”. Birth is a severing for the mother: “He had to be made free, millimetre by millimetre from my flesh, made from my flesh [...] He had to be hacked free, chipped millimetre by millimetre, sundered from me”.⁷ This image of separation block by block is appropriate this place of digging, the quarry where we have gathered, on which the film is projected, where the dancer must cut a few blocks of dance, to find the heart-tearing creation of the other, where, at the end of the show, we hear the sound of a rock fall, as if the creation had definitively detached itself from inert matter and each spectator would leave with a fragment.

The relationship between the stage and the film is not one of a mirror image, a reduplication, a dialogue between recorded and live. The gap widens between film and the concentrated and stylised abstraction of ‘contact dance’. The two modes of representation stand in total opposition to one another: by digging in the quarry, by closing oneself up in the representation of the massacre, the film calls on blood, water, violence, hysteria. By removing the stones thrown at the beginning of the play from the theatrical stage, in pushing to the edge of the playing area making a border, a wall to guard from the barbarian wilderness, the dance creates an aesthetic universe, a smooth and shiny surface suited to choreographic movement. Thus even the violent actions (hitting oneself, impaling the other on a stake, quartering, tie him down with rope) are stylised actions, refined representations of violence. This piece must be drunk ‘puur’ (‘neat’), like a glass of whiskey, and without diluting the effort. For example, the sticks thrown from one side of the stage to the other by the dancers in motion, require a great deal of skill, but unlike the bricks from the first Vandekeybus show, which were thrown and caught in the air, these sticks have protective rubber on both ends. The risk here is no greater than in other dance companies. Is it a question of our having developed a tolerance, as with dangerous performance art? We disregard the danger represented by these manoeuvres. The blows delivered to oneself or others are fake, the trajectories are perfectly drawn, the musical interjections are made pertinently. In this moment of capturing (photo...), the gestural parallelism of the dancers, the changes of rhythm, the clearly visible

⁷ Les poèmes de P.F. Thomès sont reproduits dans le fascicule de photos.

geometric pattern of convergence towards one motif, the metaphorical and non-literal use of objects, all of this shows that the whole show is concentrated on clear and precise figures. Resisting, unlike Jan Fabre, the temptation to give verbal explanation, the choreography never slips into a becoming happening or a work of performance art. Better than the necessary disappointing representation of a calamity, or the powerful but tiring description of plagues, this piece has found a pure form, that stands up for itself and was lucky enough to have been reworked (rather than translated) by the addition of the very beautiful poems of P. F. Thomèse and never illustrative music of David Eugene Edwards et Fausto Romitelli. One cannot stress enough the importance and quality of the musical compositions used in all these shows.

7) In the long Odyssey through the calamities of Avignon, *Mue*, performed at the château de Saumane, in deepest Provence, offers a quiet moment, the perfect counter example of this obsession with despair: it is about the presentation of a founding myth to better understand not so much the nature of man as man's place in the universe.

Mue.Première Mélopée is a “sonar and poetic Wara for nine voices, one electronic voice, and a percussionist, and a sound installation” to quote the strange wording of the programme. Jean Lambert-wild, the director, and Jean-Luc Therminarias, the composer, following a stay with the Xavantes in the Rio das Mortes Indian reserve, in the Brazilian Mato Grosso, called on five Xavante Indians to reconstruct with them along with four French actors and actresses, a Wara, an open space where the men of the ‘council of elders’ gather everyday in a circle at daybreak and sunset. (Photo).

The four members of the 326 cooperative and the five Xavante Indians are in a circle on the central mound, backs to the audience, each in front of a microphone. The spectators are seated around this mound on seats placed directly on the sandy ground, and listen to the words spoken by the chorus as well as the narrator who walks around the exterior circle. What they hear has been described as “a speech by Serebura, a dream by Waëhipo junior and myths from the Xavante community of Etenhiripipa”. It would be futile to attempt to differentiate that which comes from Serebura, from Waëhipo or from the (re)creation of Lambert-wild, since everything is set up in order that everything will become mixed, word and dream, myth and poetry. car tout est précisément disposé de manière à mêler les paroles et les rêves, le mythe et la poésie. The origin of the words as well as of the source of the sounds are undetermined. Interculturalism is put into practice. There is much tact, much restraint, much elegance and much integrity in this thoughtful and sensitive collaboration, which avoids being voyeuristic or patronizing.

The resulting ceremony (can it really be called a 'show' or should we not rather call it a 'cultural performance'?) avoid the trap of 'exotic' ritual, artificially transported to this park under Provence skies for this enlightened audience open to all the world's cultures.* The spatial, musical and discursive setup renders obsolete any notion of authenticity, cultural identity, universality or cultural essentialism. We witness, then, a quiet questioning of the intercultural theatre of the 1980s and 1990s, that of Brook, Mnouchkine or Barba. We do not get a transfer of cultural bits and pieces, a reconstitution of the culture of the other; nor a apology to cultural universalities or a postmodern relativising of all cultures, even less the whiny discourse banning the quoting any culture that does not belong to us and which is protected by communitarian laws disguised as politically correctness.

Far from seeking to reconstitute the authentic speech of the Indians, of displaying scraps of dance or ritual, the *mise en scène* unapologetically employs the latest sound technology and uses the remarkable talents of the composer de *Therminarias*. It is the voices, all so different in terms of texture and emotion, that are brought to the fore, in the sometimes centred and sometimes peripheral space made by the speakers. Not just to be modern or simply to be impressive, but to delicately enter the texture of the other's speech. The voices help to disorientate the audience, which is no longer able to reconstitute original or primary speech. The condition for this is that the spectator accepts to play the game and treat the voice and music as speech in movement, constantly changing its origin. The *Wara* becomes the decentered centre giving impetus to poetic reflection. Everybody's voice breaks, as if they were adolescents: become something other and while remaining ourselves. We change our voice and voice changes us. Our voice breaking is also the change in our mental and political attitude toward other cultures, the abandonment of our concept and words:

"here's what the A'Uwé Uptabi taught me,
these men of truth from Etênhiritipa,
to slip into all the contained faraway places of my dreams
to find the form to share them
to free myself from my words
and to say,
the dawn of the transformation
which will no longer belong to me.

These words are penned by Lambert-wild, but they are everyone's dream. This dawning of a transformation has nothing of the 'grand soir', the evening before the revolution, of revolutionaries of the past! A moment perhaps still invisible when the culturalist position and universal humanist values will make a discreet comeback. This return which follow abandonment corresponds to a phase in

contemporary ethnology, as in the case of Philippe Descola for example. In his studies of the Jivaros Amazonian Indians, Descola insists both on learning about cultural diversity and on a critique of extreme culturalist positions that “end up saying that everything is the product of social life and cultural constraints” [...] Anthropology, for a very long time, had as its object of study the understanding of human nature in all its diversity. The accumulation of ethnographic data meant that we lost sight that our fundamental objective is the understanding of a single human nature, which brings solutions to some of our problems. Our world places the emphasis on the discontinuity between human and non-human (a moral discontinuity in a sense) and on material continuity. In societies like that in which the Jivaros live, the emphasis is – on the other hand – placed on moral continuity and material discontinuity.”⁸

Without wishing to deny the obvious cultural differences, Lambert-wild also insists on this single human nature. His task is to bring together different voices, people, texts and styles, but the performing setup, the endless translations, the changes of identity counterbalance this diversity by way of a deliberate blurring of boundaries: who is in fact speaking, and to whom?. Towards the end of the evening, the external commentator, the ‘electronic voice’, declares his intentions: “I’m going to tell you how the world was made. Here I am, as our forbearers told.” He concludes the Xavante narrative in the manner of an anthropologist well versed Levi-Strauss: “This is the way myth speaks [...] This myth I’m speaking of maintains a living tradition [...] You are similar to us [...] you also come from our forbearers [...] I ask you to respect us [...] I don’t want you to treat us like animals any more [...] You may leave. Forget we ever existed.” The calamity already happened five centuries ago, the only thing that matters today, it to limit the damage and learn to live together.

It is surprising to hear the white narrator speak in this manner, even when rechristened as an electronic voice: the representative of an invisible chorus or of the European audience speaks for the Indians, he gives the European humanist discourse, and uses concepts from western anthropology. But, if one looks closer, and at the very logic of the working process, this discourse in fact tries to transcend the usual divisions. In sociological terms one might well be tempted to point out the huge economic difference between the Xavantes and the citizens of Belfort, between the international co-production (about which the programme contains fifteen lines of text!) and the fragile community of the Indians. Lambert-wild makes use of poetry and dream to justify this convergence and his work puts these principles to test. Certainly, the support of institutions must have

⁸ Philippe Descola, « Les Jivaros d’Amazonie et nous », *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 14-20 juillet 2005, p.71. Voir aussi son dernier livre : *Par-delà nature et culture*, Gallimard, 2005

been vital for this enterprise, which was probably very expensive, certainly the political plan remains at the stage of declaring its intentions (as regards the neo-liberal dead end and the necessary questions around ownership and the division of work), but no other show at Avignon that week, so renewed the art of *mise en scène*, asked the burning question with such energy. Calm before the storm?ne pose les questions brûlantes avec une telle énergie.

8) The last example from the week, *The Biography Remix*, a retrospective on the life and performances of Marina Abramovic, was directed by her colleague and old friend, Michael Laub. There is thus no ambiguity in the presentation of this event. It is not a show for the general public, but rather a very clear and well devised example of a genre that is little-known at Avignon, making use of historical examples, performance works from the performer's past.

This remixed biography, which is a sort of work in progress for Marina, a permanent recap of her already long career, is no doubt the key to understanding the other shows, to evaluate with changing relationship between *mise en scène* and performance art without prejudice. This might also be the right occasion for highlight the notion of calamity, as opposed to that of risk or of danger courted by the performer. In a way, this performer (often a female performer) plays the role of a *calamity*, in the second meaning of the word, not the natural plague, but the person who causes constant problems as well as being the victim of these self-inflicted problems, a *Calamity Jane*. Is the performer not a calamity for herself, some who endlessly creates problems and troubles for herself. If she has the skill of creating her own unhappiness, she can also undo it with brilliance, sometimes with humour, and can triumph despite the trials and tribulations she brings upon herself. She has nothing of the natural calamity, which its very nature, remains in place for as long as possible and leaves humans little chance to avoid or neutralise it.

We instinctively sense that this show has found its balance and its positive pedagogical strength. Michael Laub designed this account as a chronology by displaying two lines of rolling text in French and English showing the key dates in the life of Marina Abramovic as well as those of her main works. Laub's exterior eye is not critical – that is not his role – but he likes to give humorous points of reference. He opts for a double representation: video extracts on a screen covering the stage opening and live events that start the minute the screen is raised, thus giving the impression that the stage reality comes out of the screen. Thus he sets up simultaneous actions, serialises a same action, conveying a real aesthetic quality. The famous slapping duel, performed by five groups becomes a beautiful moment of rhythm, losing its original violence in favour of

an ensemble effect: it sounds like several ping pong games taking place in the same immense hall.

In the first sequence (photo.), Marina Abramovic, hanging from the wall, welcomes the audience, holding two snakes in her hands, while two huge placid hounds come onstage and gnaw on a bone, just below the snakes. Worrying growling sounds come from the loudspeakers, an Italian prima donna gives us a song with a microphone then with a megaphone. Fright is soon replaced with admiration for the feel for composition, humour and visual beauty.

The whole production is of this quality, that of a *mise en scène* that runs smoothly, which, without excluding the risk and incidents of performance art, nonetheless keeps them at a distance, puts them in perspective, lets us have a sample, a conceptual version, perfect for a Masters' dissertation. The remix eliminates the risk or at least minimises it, reduces its impact. Protected by the distance as they overlook the stage, the spectators semiotise and aesthetise to their heart's content. But at least they can breath, facing the events bravely and head-on, they are not really pushed to their wits' end*, and see the display as if a circus show or sports event. They slowly get to know Marina, grow to like her, learn of her painful path, leave to one side their prejudices about the smoke and mirrors of art, the frivolity of the theatre, discover presence and silence. When Marina finally comes to sit down before them wearing a formal grey suit, looking them in the eye, enjoying a moment of silence and stillness, there are a few seconds, a moment of universal relief, a general state of *anagnorisis*, deep empathy, a meeting. Then, suddenly, there is a ripple of applause, like a warm fire that nobody expected anymore, given the overall state of calamity in the other artists programmed.

Calamity in all its forms, from destruction to catastrophe, is undoubtedly the only vague general theme common to these eight Avignon shos. This through line reveals an obsession and a profound discontent that we would should take seriously. *Civilisation and its discontents* or culture and its calamities? Things have escalated since Freud, but we should be on guard against catastrophism, a fascination with unhappiness. So let us content ourselves with recounting the

week, and seeing how it might have taught us to better face unhappiness and better work for the theatre.

1) From the tragic to the calamitous

The tragic catastrophe, which is sudden and punctual, has been supplanted by the endemic foreseeable and enduring calamity. Many productions, and almost as many spectators, seem afflicted with a deep and long-lasting depression, of a black vision of history. Calamity, in these productions, is more a metaphor or allegory than a tangible reality, a plague sent by God or the forces of evil. It is present as an endemic evil, a situation offering no way out, a social or religious disasters that that will linger on and against which we are defenceless. As we have seen: the productions make jumbled references to religious fundamentalism (*Dieu et les esprits vivants*, *Anathème*, *Puur*), to hatred of women and bodies, to the holocaust, to genocides (*Mue*), to the inquisition (*Je suis sang*). All this refers to historical realities or to current events.

In this world shown as a grey and calamitous landscape, there is no trace of the grotesque comic, of Homeric laughter, of a rejoicing body. There is nothing tragic either, since, despite the anathema, condemnation and imprecation, we hardly find any God to blaspheme against, any transcendence against which to rage, any destiny against which to rise up.

No new comedy, no renewal of the tragic: clearly the situation is desperate. It's almost like a drama! The catharsis of the spectator is no longer possible, since identification with the hero and acceptance of transcendence no longer function. Catharsis is based on fear and pity, calamity is synonymous with angst and disinterest (the 'compassion fatigue'), apathy in the face of the suffering of others, that Gomez-Pena writes about). Calamity is a drama of irreversible degradation inflicted by a God, more blinded than hidden. Unlike catastrophe that affects particular individuals, consciously making them disappear, laying its cards on the table, calamity affects the anonymous masses, without apparent, or absurd, reason, refusing to show any cards. In this spiritual void, this disappearing of bodies, this splitting of body and mind, the unnameable calamity can easily make itself at home. Because calamity, though it be immemorial, and link with all civilisations today feeds on the death of ideologies, on the absence of any political analysis that leads to action, the renouncement of critical thinking. Calamitous thinking, that end of history, of postmodern relativism, of the well-fed and right-thinking, displaces the natural plague onto social life, puts us in the axis of evil, threatens us with divine punishment.

Calamity as weapon of mass destruction, universal depression, indescribable panic, lets the spectators believe that everything they is

rotten, destroyed, condemned without a word of explanation. This dehistoricised way of thinking is found with nuances and variations in the productions analysed. It is in general more defeatist than nihilistic, more provocative than subversive. Violence which is the most frequent and obvious sign of calamity, is ubiquitous, but, as Denis Guénoun, states, “the idea that violence should in itself have the value of revolt or provocation appears to be one of the founding presuppositions of contemporary representational ideology [...] violence no longer has any critical value and from now it is violence itself that must be the subject of criticism.”⁹

It is far from the case that this violence is the subject of criticism in all the Avignon productions. In each of these eight examples, it is shown in a highly differentiated way, sometimes leading to its being put to question and reconsidering the powers of calamity. To see that this is the case, one only need observe the effect of calamity on the bodies. The bodies of the actors/dancers/performers is actually the best barometer for gauging how the body faces the violence and reacts to calamity.

2) The body as barometer

1) and 2) For Jan Fabre, the bodies of the performers are naturally valiant and naked, in no way anaemic despite his concerns. It is a dancing, rejoicing, tortured, bodies subject to despair (the Knight), to wandering (Diogenes), to tears (the Rock), but still ready for new conquests. Calamity is, paradoxically, what the process of civilisation (according to Norbert Elias) does to the the vital instincts. But should we not fear new calamity with the arrival of this superman given over to his warlike instincts and thirsty for blood?

3) The body of Jan Decorte, of his insipid character Sangloupdiable (blood, wolf, devil), is becomes “Mad with rage to the point of killing”, as the programme says, but we only ever see him naked or dressed as a monk, sword in hand. A body at times untied and at times tied to his partner with a thick rope, suitable for hanging oneself.

4) The bodies of *B 03 Berlin* are vague outlines, silent and malleable figures, phantoms and phantasies in constant evolution. They are the blurry images that we today make of the tragic body, martyred, but impossible to grasp for the victims. But just who are they? We only remember King Kong and the anonymous rabbits he unloads with a fork. Apart from this struggle between two bodies, the body escapes us, faints, is undecided between *coup de theatre* and calamity.

5) The naked bodies of *Anathème* are present and insistent, an insistence rarely achieved onstage. Beyond the evoking of the sacrificed, they refer only to themselves, as in performance art. This

⁹ « Dispositions critiques », *Alternatives théâtrales*, n.85-86, 2005,p.107.

ambiguity transforms this boring but disturbing show into a sit in without end.

6) In *Puur*, the battered bodies of the film, then the gassed and disinfected bodies at the beginning of the ballet, get back on their feet and engage in almost acrobatic contact. Their complex trajectories, their lifting and throwing, their balancing and their duels are an active and decided response to the violence of the outside world and not an acceptance of this violence.

7) In the *Wara* in Provence, we particularly notice the voice of the participants, as if the whole universe and the struggle for survival had taken refuge in ancestral speech and in a voice seeming close because live, and because amplified by a microphone. Therefore the body of a survivor, fragile and strong, determined in order to survive to make alliance with technology and to people of goodwill who collect and extend their words and their acts.

8) The body facing all dangers, at the mercy of snakes, slaps, exhausting journeys and all kinds of trials and tribulations, Marina Abramovic's body, in fact, avoids all catastrophe, refuses enslavement, and ends up facing the audience, calmly sitting facing it, all suffering forgotten, turning its back on all the calamities of the world.

Jean Lambert-wild received visitors in his bed at the edge of the castle; Marina Abramovic takes her leave of the audience in a moment of universal calm: have we then gone from calamity to (bedridden) calm/ity?

3) From *mise en scène* to performance art

Once the theme of calamity had been identified (and it would have been difficult to!), it was still necessary to check the main issue: how the different productions treat and represent the theme. We have made a distinction between two kinds of (re)presentation, **mise en scène** and **performance art**: **mise en scène**, meaning theatre as it shaped by *mise en scène* since the end of the 19th Century, and **performance**, as is practiced since the 1960s. If none of the eight productions is performance in the strictest sense, all of them contain moments of performativity, where the present, risk, uncertainty, or chance prevent the fictional representation of an event.

Nonetheless, despite this mixing of modes of (re)presentation, the *mise en scène*/performance distinction endures. One must simply grasp unfailing alliance. Everything hinges on the question of presence and representation (of meaning). According to Alain Badiou, "the theatre is the perception of the instant as an instant of thought."¹⁰ Is performance art not then the perception of theatre as a thought of the instant?

¹⁰ *Rhapsodie pour le théâtre*, Paris, le spectateur français, Imprimerie Nationale, 1990, p.115.

The public obviously does not ask itself whether it is attending a *mise en scène* or if it is involved in a performance. The spectator suspects, as soon as setting foot in Avignon, that things will not be easy, that simple mimetic representations of the world cannot be hoped for, and that one must 'go with the flow'. Nothing surprises or shocks the spectator: what is a naked body, a snake hanging over a well-trained dog compared with a kamikaze that kills surrounding scores of people? The spectator has also become used to the media representation of the worst calamities, or else feels protected by a imaginary bubble, not believing (if only in order to go on living) that bombs and catastrophes could one day regularly fall on him or her, like a calamity, a real calamity.

BRECHTIAN EPILOGUE

Overwhelmed by all these universal misfortunes, exhausted by these recurring calamities, I try, in my room at Saint-Joseph, in good company and well looked after by the CEMEA, always there for me, to get to sleep. But under my window, I hear Jean-François Sivadier's actors performing *La Mort de Danton*. What, I asked myself, more of the "awful fatalism of history?", of this "revolution that devours its own children?" Later that night, they performed Brecht's *La Vie de Galilée*. Galileo was also defeated by the obscurantism of the church, but for the time moment, in this scene at the beginning of the play, I see him explain the workings of the world to his pupil. And it is illuminating, light and inspiring! And, it was enough to think about it, it goes round! (Photo.) With a few boards, a backdrop, clear gestures fitted to the actions, a miracle occurs: the world is reborn and with it theatre. One need only follow the trajectory of the stars, and those of the actors' gestures, put simple words into orbit onstage, rely on the lively imagination of the audience that I see down there, captive, but alert, to construct a world that is based on ours, but which transforms it.

Will hope triumph over calamity? Before falling into a doubtful sleep, a warning from Raymond Williams comes to me: "It is in making hope practical, rather than despair convincing, that the ways to peace can be entered."¹¹

¹¹ *Towards 2000*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1983, p.240. "It is in making hope practical, rather than despair convincing, that the ways to peace can be entered"